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ABSTRACT

An approach (the "orientation seminar") is described to help gifted students understand their abilities and learn to act effectively in future social and academic situations. The seminar consists of nine sessions to be used in sequence with the following topics: (1) pre-measures of self-concept, attitudes, myths and realities, (2) orientation to the seminar, (3) characteristics of gifted and talented students, (4) relationship of intelligence to giftedness, (5) ways to free creative thinking, (6) values about one's abilities, (7) stress/burnout, (8) simulated problem solving, and (9) the future in the gifted program. Preliminary data from field testing with 20 junior high students, and their teachers are presented in a session-by-session format. (CL)

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GIFTED PLUS:
A UNIT DESIGNED TO TEACH GIFTED CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR ABILITIES

BY

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PRESENTED AT THE 1985 COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN CONVENTION, THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE GIFTED, ANNAHEIM.

Perhaps the greatest challenge awaiting newly identified gifted students is understanding and integrating the changes in their lives associated with public acknowledgement of their exceptional abilities. Dealings with agemates, family members, teachers and other significant figures are thereafter colored by the gifted/talented label. Inability to deal effectively with this new status has been linked to chronic relational conflict, gifted program and even public school drop out and diminished productivity in later life.

Problems might emerge as early as the first few weeks following placement in the traditional part-time resource room program. From tacit or open acknowledgment of the gifted child in the regular classroom as one of a small constellation of academic/creative stars, s/he is rocketed into a galaxy of such stars. It is no wonder that researchers report diminished feelings of self worth among gifted students during their first year of membership in a special program for the gifted (Rodgers, 1979).

Another illustration of inner confict has also been found -- discrepancies between gifted students' social and academic self concepts (Ross & Parker, 1980). Although being labelled gifted might raise students' academic self concept, it might simultaneously hamper development of their social self concept. The resulting discrepancy has been named as contributing to such problems as underachievement and difficulty in adjusting to placement in special programs for the gifted and talented (Rodgers, 1979; Whitmore, 1980).

Researchers note that historically the primary focus in identifying and programming for exceptionally able students has been academic (Ross & Parker, 1980). They have suggested orienting these students to the nature of giftedness as a way to broaden programming emphases defensibly, to increase students' self-awareness and self-understanding and to resolve the discrepancy between social and academic self concepts (Betts and Knapp, 1981).

For the past four years we at the University of Kansas have been working with gifted students and their teachers to introduce students to their special program in a way that will help them to understand and use their potential, to rely on their mental age mates for needed support and to establish an open and complete relationship with their teachers in regular and special education settings. Our unit is generally called "the orientation seminar" by teachers. It was designed for use as a required experience for all gifted students entering the program. However, teachers field testing the unit report benefits for gifted students who have been identified for as long as ten years. The seminar consists of nine sessions, to be used in sequence, although each has been treated as an independent workshop for students. Topics were selected by teachers and students from grades 4 - 12.

Unlike other materials focusing on issues related to giftedness (On Being Gifted, Gifted Kids Survival Guide, Gifted Children Speak Out), Gifted Plus is designed to be used by students and teachers or other key adults to educate youngsters systematically about their abilities and to empower them to act effectively with in future social and academic situations. In the sections that follow, we outline the key features of the curriculum and describe results of field tests.

List of Sessions and Related Goals

To give the reader a more complete picture of the unit's components, topics and related goals are listed below.

Session #	Title	Goals
1	"Pre" Measures	To collect relevant pretest data (self-concept, attitudes, myths and realities)
2	Orientation	1. Students will understand the purposes of the seminars. 2. Students will begin to develop a sense of groupness, trust and psychological safety.
3	Defining Giftedness: Characteristics of the Gifted and Talented	1. Students will understand how their local school district defines giftedness and identifies students for the gifted program. 2. Students will understand that giftedness is defined relative to one's cultural values. 3. Students will understand that different identification data yield different information.
4	Intelligence, Testing, Relationship of Intelligence to Giftedness	1. Students will understand the relationship between abstract concepts such as intelligence and related test behaviors. 2. Students will understand the relationship between giftedness as defined by intelligence test scores and by real-world behavior.
5	Creative Thinking-How We Block It-Ways to Free It	1. Students will identify the four (Guilfordian) components of creative thinking.

		2. Students will compare intelligence and creativity, and will recognize the relationship between them. 3. Students will self-assess conditions under which they are most creative, conditions underwhich they block or repress creative ideas. They will identify one step to take to recognize and overcome a block to expressing a creative idea.
6	Gifted Plus_____ Examining Values About One's Abilities	1. Students will demonstrate that giftedness is only part of what makes a person worthwhile. 2. Students will understand that most situations call for giftedness plus other abilities. They will analyze situations and decide what those abilities are. In particular, students will indicate that for giftdness to make a difference, it must be applied to problems, projects, tasks and roles with effort and whole-hearted commitment.
7	The Stress/ Burnout Syndrome- or-How to Avoid Making an Ash Out of Yourself	1. Students will recognize the causes of stress, and will distinguish between stress and eustress. 2. Students will develop skills to help them cope with distress.
8	You're the Expert!	1. Students will apply their learnings to simulated problem-solving situations. 2. Students will compare and contrast their solutions with the experts' ideas. They will evaluate differences in ideas in ideas on the basis of what they've learned about education for the gifted and talented.
9	Operation Springboard-or- Where Do We Go From Here?	To draw closure on the seminar and to prepare students for what lies ahead of them in the gifted program.

Field Testing the Gifted Plus Unit

Preliminary studies. The unit was developed in conjunction with a secondary gifted consultant who needed to orient students to program changes. The unit was then revised and used the following quarter with sophomores entering the program. A junior high school teacher of the gifted was then contacted, and she reviewed the materials. From her experiences, topics were deleted, added and modified to meet the needs of younger students. A group of teachers of junior high and high school gifted students then critiqued the materials for relevance and appropriate challenge level. The curriculum was reworked for a fourth time and field tested with twenty junior high school students.

Research results were promising. In only nine weeks, this group of junior high students taking part in the unit increased their global and social self concepts. Because self concept is generally such a stable personal attribute by this age, these results attested to the potentially stronger impact of the unit on younger students, whose emerging self perceptions are as yet more malleable, making them more vulnerable to public ridicule for their exceptional abilities.

Current research. With support from the 1983 Hollingworth Research Award, the curriculum was again revised for use with 4th through 6th grade gifted students. Participants in this field testing phase were solicited at the 1983 annual meetings of the National Association for Gifted Children and The Association for the Gifted and through the Kansas Association for Gifted,Talented and Creative Students newsletter. Seventeen school districts, representing ten states, are taking part in this phase of research on the unit. Seven school districts have completed their work with the unit as of April 1, 1985. In the following section, anecdotal evaluations of the unit are presented.

Anecodtal evaluations: Feedback from participating students. Student reactions to the unit support its impact in the following areas: increasing knowledge about unit topics; developing coping and other related skills; establishing more open communication among gifted students and between students and their gifted program teacher; increased introspection and self discovery; enhancing opportunities to ventilate feelings; and realizing that giftedness is linked to real world behavior. Illustrative comments are listed below by session.

Session # 2: Orientation. -- I think this was the most interesting because we found out a little bit more about ourselves. -- I like the true/false test and that there were no right or wrong answers. -- The Student Attitude Survey helped me get out what was on my mind. --I feel this is necessary knowing the difference between myth and reality.

Session # 3: Defining Giftedness. -- I learned about why I'm in this class and I feel more secure here. -- I think I understand the gifted program more and I can suggest it to other people who might be gifted. -- I understand now that there may be people who are not in the program that (sic) should be. They have a different kind of giftedness. -- I learned it is not always easy to choose the kids for the gifted program. Maybe now I can understand why I was chosen and others were not. -- I learned how hard it is to be a gifted teacher. Now I know what decisions you face.

Session # 4: Intelligence, Testing, Relationship of Giftedness to Intelligence. -- It feels good just to know that other people know we don't have to be best at everything. -- Rating giftedness was most interesting along with IQ's of famous people. Seeing peoples' IQs made it interesting. -- Guessing famous people's IQs - because we needed to know that some people are not as gifted as we think.

Session # 5: Creative Thinking - How We Block It - Ways To Free It. -- It helped to know when you were and were not creative because you will know what to do the next time you're in the same situation. -- Creativity is not the same as intelligence. I can now understand the difference between creativity and intelligence. -- We block it [creativity] by fear of mistakes... don't worry about what other people will do to you. -- We looked at fears. It was helpful to talk about it. -- I feel we should know this because it will help us with life later on. -- Sheet on fear... we need to overcome the fear of being criticized and laughed at.

Session # 6: Gifted Plus _____.-- I liked trying to think up other things that make them gifted other than what people are tested for here. -- We found out about different giftedness in people. -- It was fun figuring out the plus qualities of our gifted friends. -- Taking a look at friends... it gave me time to think if they really were my friends.

Session # 7: The Stress/Burnout Syndrome - or - How to Avoid Making an Ash Out of Yourself. -- It helps me relax when I'm nervous. It gives me a chance to rest. I liked learning about how to relax because now I can take a lot of pressure off myself by using the relaxation techniques. -- I learned about the different kinds of stress, how it affects you, what causes it. It explains why people act the way they do. -- It helped picking what I thought would be the most stressful situations.

Session # 8: You're the Expert. -- I liked finding out how other gifted people have problems. It's good to see what problems gifted kids go through... so we won't. -- It made me feel in command. I felt like they needed me. It helps to know how to handle certain situations.

Anecdotal evaluations: Feedback from participating teachers. Teachers' comments echoed students' reactions. Because teachers were encouraged to modify the unit to reflect their unique teaching style, special knowledge and prior student knowledge and interests, many offered useful suggestions for additional activities or modifications for specific lesson objectives. Their comments and suggestions attest to their involvement and "ownership" of the unit, a crucial determinant of its success. A few representative reactions are listed below.

Session # 1: "Pre" Measures. I loved watching their expressions on the Piers-Harris test! Some of them thought about themselves for the very first time in this way... It was very informative from my point of view. I discovered that most of my students are doing things they feel someone else has chosen for them - especially in after school hours.

Session # 2: Orientation. The discussion of different types of groups and group membership seemed to get the most interest and input.

Session # 3: Defining Giftedness. Students enjoyed finding out specifics of "how we got here." We apparently assume too much knowledge on the part of parents and what they share with students. Case study packets were extremely effective and well liked.

Session # 4: Intelligence. They loved the "t" test. It really sparked some heavy discussions. All enjoyed IQ items. The correlation between intelligence and accomplishment among famous people was most impressive to students.

Session # 5: Creativity. We had already done a great deal with creative thinking so it fit right in. Students were delighted to receive the handout and many were able to talk openly about their fears.

Session # 6: Gifted Plus ____. They really understood what the "+" was! They clearly noted ambitious, leadership, never give up, diligent, creative, inventive, etc... They seemed weak on realizing that failure didn't faze these people. They felt that if they continue to find failure and negative responses, they want to give up and go on to something else. Tells us about negative, nagging teaching techniques, doesn't? They enjoyed the section on their friends and said they never really sat down to evaluate what qualities their friends possessed that they valued.

Session # 7: Stress/Burnout. I didn't even know "eustress." They enjoyed sharing stressful situations and it was good for them to see that others face the same problems as they do. Introducing them to ways of coping with stress was an important part of the lesson to me.

Session # 8: You're the Expert. The letters were very effective. Many of the students discovered themselves in these letters. It helped to see and hear the teachers' viewpoints. I must admit their answers were excellent.

Session # 9: Operation Springboard. They were very enthusiastic to write the letter to themselves. I think I'll have all my students... write a letter to themselves - stating good points - what they do well, strengths, positive remarks - and put it in an envelope. ANY DAY they are discouraged (failed a test, didn't get a part in the play, etc.), they may come down and get their letter. It will be the boost they need so they remember that they are special little people.

Conclusions

The empirical evidence for the unit's effectiveness is limited by some lack of standard implementation procedures and a control group. However, the sample's diversity supports the unit's applicability to a variety of settings. Naturalistic observations and longitudinal follow-ups with participants will yield additional evidence of the unit's long range impact on gifted students' behavior.

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